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Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research Visits NHRC

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NHRC Public Affairs



SAN DIEGO (Oct. 27, 2016) Capt. Rita Simmons (center left), commanding officer at Naval Health Research Center (NHRC), and Jay Heaney (center right) give Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research, Dr. Melissa L. Flagg (left), a tour of the command's environmental chamber. The chamber is part of the Warfighter Performance Lab and can simulate environments with temperatures ranging from -23°F to 130°F and relative humidity ranging from 5 to 90 percent. As the DoD's premier deployment health research center, NHRC's cutting-edge research and development is used to optimize the operational health and readiness of the nation's armed forces. (U.S. Navy photo by Mayra A. Conde)

SAN DIEGO – Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research, Dr. Melissa Flagg, visited the Naval Health Research Center (NHRC) to learn more about the research being conducted to improve warfighter readiness and health, Oct. 26.

Flagg, who is responsible for policy and oversight of the Department of Defense (DoD) science and technology programs for basic research through advanced development, met with command leadership and toured NHRC's infectious diseases and warfighter performance laboratories, learning more about the center's unique capabilities.

"Part of our mission at NHRC is to conduct research and share our findings with DoD leaders to help inform policy, practice, and programs with validated findings," said Capt. Rita Simmons, NHRC commanding officer. "Dr. Flagg's visit provided an excellent opportunity to ensure DoD

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leaders at her level gain a clear understanding of the depth and breadth of our military health and readiness research capabilities and how it all translates into products that benefit the warfighter.”

Among NHRC’s research capabilities is the work being done by data scientists. NHRC has developed unique databases in support of epidemiological and longitudinal studies of health and performance in military personnel. These include the Career History and Archival Medical and Personnel System, with career-spanning data for over 10 million service members, and the Expeditionary Encounter Medical Database that has accurate injury and clinical treatment data for casualties from point of injury to definitive care and rehabilitation.

“The data that you have is such a valuable resource,” said Flagg. “You have some very unique capabilities and these records are phenomenal. The ability to understand how being in the military impacts health now and in the future is important.”

During Flagg’s tour of NHRC’s infectious diseases lab, Dr. Christopher Myers, director for infectious diseases, explained how NHRC works to protect the health and readiness of service members by monitoring disease rates among military populations, evaluating the effectiveness of novel vaccines that protect against infectious pathogens like adenovirus and norovirus, and supporting the development of advanced diagnostics devices.

“Our military operates in a global environment, which means they may be exposed to numerous pathogens that cause acute illness and can be life-threatening,” said Myers. “Being able to provide protection through vaccination where we can and early detection of those pathogens is important to keeping our service members healthy and medically ready.”

Flagg also toured the Warfighter Performance Lab and got a first-hand look at the multi-disciplinary research NHRC scientists are conducting to optimize warfighter performance and reduce injury.

The lab houses several cutting-edge research tools, including the Computer Assisted Rehabilitation Environment (CAREN), an immersive virtual reality system; a sleep and fatigue lab; and an environmental chamber, a large structure that can simulate environments with temperatures ranging from -23°F to 130°F.

“Having a team of multidisciplinary subject matter experts and all of these diverse research capabilities under one roof enables a wide range of possibilities for current and future research,” said Cmdr. Shawn Soutiere, department head for warfighter performance.

“You really do have it all right here,” said Flagg as she emphasized the importance of human performance research for the military. “We want to optimize the warfighter so they can perform at their best.”

Flagg summed up her visit by saying NHRC’s contributions to optimizing individual warfighter performance and providing innovative solutions to population health concerns are invaluable and are truly representative of DoD’s push toward excellence in medical and health research.

As the DoD’s premier deployment health research center, NHRC’s cutting-edge research and development is used to optimize the operational health and readiness of the nation’s armed forces. In proximity to more than 95,000 active duty service members, world-class universities, and industry partners, NHRC sets the standard in joint ventures, innovation, and translational research.

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